Attracting Deer to Forested Areas

Tennessee Department of Agriculture, Division of Forestry

Tennessee has an abundance of deer. But since deer have a range of 300 to 2,400 acres, they will usually be subject to hunting on adjacent lands. You can nevertheless attract deer to your property by providing what they seek: nutritious food, minerals, and shelter. Groves of evergreens (cedars or pines) as small as five acres supply usable shelter. Minerals can be placed in a depression and worked into the ground. The mix should contain 25% to 50% salt and have a calcium to phosphorous ratio of 2:1. It is illegal to mix food with salt and then hunt over it.

Food during critical seasons is usually the factor that limits deer populations and so it is what they seek most. There are three ways to provide food: cut trees, plant food plots, and fertilize.

Forest openings an acre or more in size have up to 10 times as much wildlife food as the forest interior. Making openings as small as 1/8 acre (about six mature trees) can provide forage and possibly some income from timber. However, to be optimal, openings should be an acre in size. Ideally, openings should comprise 1-5% of the total forest area. These areas will reforest naturally, and so new openings will need to be made every few years. Dense sapling stands that grow up in these openings will provide prime fawn rearing habitat.

Plants in forest openings highly preferred by deer include Japanese honeysuckle, blackberry, greenbriar, strawberry bush, persimmon, ash, and oaks. The protein content and yield of these plants can be raised by fertilization, which should help attract deer. Using a timed-release fertilizer high in nitrogen, such as 36-3-7, will save time, effort and cost, and will minimize loss of nitrogen through leaching and volatilization. As a rough guideline, apply about 500 pounds per acre in the early spring. Or, apply about 250 pounds per acre of a conventional high nitrogen fertilizer (such as 24-6-6) in March, May and September. Fertilize mast-bearing trees in the same way. Timed-released tablets are available; insert them at the edge of the tree's root zone at a rate of four for every one inch of diameter. These will release nitrogen for up to two years.

Liming should not be neglected when fertilizing native vegetation. This will sometimes be difficult due to inaccessibility, but areas treated need not be large. Manually liming 1/8-acre plots will cost around $50 each if contracted out; a few plots of this size can be readily limed by most landowners. (See "Liming Wildlife Food Plots").

Late summer and late winter are times when food is least available and of lowest quality. Supplemental summer crops (and planting dates) include

- Soybeans (April-June)
- Cowpeas (April-June)
- American jointvetch (March-June)
- Rape (April-July)
- Lablab (April-June)
- Corn (March-May)
- Millet (April-July)
- Grain sorghum (May-July)

When mixing planted foods, be sure one will not crowd another out. For instance, cowpeas can be planted with corn, but only small grains should be planted with clovers. Winter food plots should contain a mix of grains and clovers. Use a low-nitrogen fertilizer such as 7-27-27 when fertilizing legume/grain mixes. Consult with your county Extension agent for recommendations on varieties and seeding rates.

Prescribed fire will increase spring forage amount and quality. You will need a permit from the Division of Forestry. Inexperienced persons should not attempt a prescribed fire. The Division of Forestry can advise you, and can sometimes assist. (See "Prescribed Burning").

Mowing and disking are low-cost options. Disking in December will promote growth of partridge pea and ragweed, which are utilized by quail and heavily browsed by deer. April disking will favor grasses. June disking benefits deer, and it promotes insects needed by turkey and quail. (Version 12-03)